

Reefer Madness on College Campuses

This past year, Colorado and Washington voters passed laws effectively legalizing marijuana for recreational use. Adults in these states may possess limited amounts of marijuana, while possession by minors remains illegal. Still looming, however, is the federal government's response to what it still classifies an illegal Schedule 1 drug^{i ii}. For many, this conflict between state and federal laws results in a "legal limbo," especially when it concerns growing and selling marijuana and the prosecution thereofⁱⁱⁱ.

But ignoring for a moment this legal quagmire, it seems that the nation's acceptance of marijuana for recreational use is at unprecedented level^{iv}. And many believe it is only a matter of time before more states legalize marijuana for recreational use, further weakening federal laws against the trafficking and use of the substance.

And why not, argue the proponents of legalization? Most scientific studies have reported that long-term use of marijuana is less harmful than long-term use of tobacco and alcohol^v. Additionally, proponents claim that reports of marijuana causing "a-motivational syndrome" (i.e., laziness) have often been exaggerated; they counter these reports by stating how regular users regain their focus after discontinuing use of the drug^{vi}.

On one hand, the college experience cultivates academic liberty, inquiry, and self-expression. Students are encouraged to think for themselves, to challenge received knowledge, often even authority. College is also interpreted as a time to explore other social liberties, a place often marked by radical metamorphoses of one's sense of identity, including the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In light of this transformative cultural atmosphere, might legalizing marijuana actually lead to a richer campus life? At Eckerd College, for instance, might students soon celebrate the occasional Friday "Reefer with Professors", and if so, with what benefits to their lives, education, and character?

On the other hand, many fear that an institution of higher learning that carries a reputation as a "pot friendly" or "party" school is announcing to the world its campus's anti-academic priorities. This reputation, some argue, will affect all students from that institution (not only those engaged in drug use), including anyone applying for post-graduate education or employment.

Scientifically, few deny that marijuana users lose focus and short-term memory while under the influence. Further, there exists among high school and college students a strong correlation between regular marijuana use and low academic performance; it remains unclear, however, whether marijuana use is a substantial cause of the low academic performance. These underachievers may be coping with their poor performance through drug use, but a host of other socio-economic and cultural variables may also play a role^{vii viii}. In any event, many believe that marijuana use necessarily compromises learning and on some level suppresses academic knowledge, unless students exercise some measure of temperance.

As recreational marijuana use gains legal acceptance in the United States, it is worthwhile to pause and consider the balance sheet. Proponents of legalization argue that with decriminalization fewer non-violent offenders will clog our prisons and, consequently, that law enforcement will put their

resources to better uses. Also, despite the current legal hand-wringing between state and federal governments, it is likely that marijuana will be taxed and regulated, much like alcohol and tobacco.

How will a college community, like Eckerd, come to a clear, moral decision about the use of marijuana on campus, specifically considering such factors as the drug's current legal status, its relation to other legalized drugs, and its effect on the users and those around the users? How might these new laws and evolving attitudes on marijuana use affect our nation's college campuses, particularly the ethical life of students?

(The title of this case was taken from the 1936 film, see for example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reefer_Madness)

This ethical case study mimics the structure of the case studies developed by the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics for their "Ethics Bowls" held twice a year. This specific case was written by the Eckerd College Ethics Bowl Club and presented to the Eckerd College Campus in February of 2012.

i <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/us/marijuana-initiatives-in-2-states-set-federal-officials-scrambling.html>

ii <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/obamas-pot-problem-20121207>

iii <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/05/us/washington-marijuana-legalization/index.html>

iv http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57556286/poll-nearly-half-support-legalization-of-marijuana/

v <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2012/01/10/healthwatch-study-finds-pot-smoke-less-harmful-than-tobacco/>

vi <http://www.substanceabusepolicy.com/content/1/1/2>

vii <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2910149/>

viii <http://her.oxfordjournals.org/content/22/3/372.full>